

The Lincoln Douglas Debates of 1858

Lesson Plan by Jennifer Erbach

Prepared for Northern Illinois University's Lincoln Net

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Students will examine the transcripts of the 1858 Lincoln-Douglas debates and create a platform for each candidate in the 1858 Senate race.

Students will utilize the candidates' arguments to explore the historical and political impact of the following:

- popular sovereignty
- compromise of 1850
- fugitive slave law
- Dred Scott case
- Kansas-Nebraska Act
- Lecompton constitution
- Missouri Compromise

Note: students should have at least a working knowledge of these terms prior to this lesson.

Introduction:

Think about the elections of government officials such as senators, governors, and the president. What are some key issues that voters are concerned about today? (Ex: abortion, stem cell research, campaign finance reform, taxes, education, etc.) Very often newspapers or private groups will publish a chart of each candidate's stand on key issues, their platform, prior to a major election. (May want to show the class an example from a recent election).

Part I:

Imagine you are a citizen in the state of Illinois during the Senate race of 1858. (Remember: at this time, representatives to Congress were not chosen by a direct popular election the way they are today. Eligible voters elected representatives to the Illinois state legislature. The state legislature in turn, voted to elect Illinois' representatives to Congress). There are two major candidates running to represent Illinois in the U.S. Senate,

Republican Abraham Lincoln and Democrat Stephen A. Douglas. Based on what you have been learning about the events leading up to the Civil War, what are some of the key issues that you as an Illinois citizen in 1858 might be concerned about? As a class, create a list of these issues. Encourage students to be specific. Examples:

- Does the candidate support the Dred Scott decision?
- Should African-Americans have the same rights as whites?
- Does the candidate support the idea of popular sovereignty?

On the board, create a chart with the issues in the rows, and columns for "Lincoln" and "Douglas".

Part II:

Now that we have our list of key issues, we need to discover the candidates' position on each issue. In 1858, Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas met for debates in the towns of Ottawa, Freeport, Jonesboro, Charleston, Galesburg, Quincy, and Alton. These meetings became known as "The Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858."

Divide the class into groups of 4-6. Each group will receive a transcript of one of the 1858 debates. The students will examine the transcripts for evidence of each candidate's positions on the class's list of key issues. Have half of the group work on Lincoln, half on Douglas.

Part III:

Each group will present its findings to the class, filling in the chart as the findings indicate to create a platform for each candidate.

Illinois State Standards addressed: **14.D.5** Interpret a variety of public policies and issues from the perspectives of different individuals and groups. **16.A.5a** Analyze historical and contemporary developments using methods of historical inquiry (pose questions, collect and analyze data, make and support inferences with evidence, report findings). **16.B.4 (US)** Identify political ideas that have dominated United States historical eras (e.g., Federalist, Jacksonian, Progressivist, New Deal, New Conservative).

Notes for the Instructor:

Time required for this lesson will be about two days if the school runs on 40-50 minute class periods, or one day if the school runs on block scheduling.

The debates held at

- Ottawa
<http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/navigate.pl?lincoln.2184>
- Galesburg
<http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/navigate.pl?lincoln.2183>
- Quincy
<http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/navigate.pl?lincoln.2188>
- Alton
<http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/navigate.pl?lincoln.2913>

are the best sources, with the majority of the discussion focused on platform issues, rather than mudslinging or party accusations.

Ottawa:

Candidates cover Dred Scott case, Nebraska bill, existence of the Union as half slave and half free, equality of the white and African races.

Freeport:

Covers fugitive slave law, admission of slave states, slavery in the territories and District of Columbia, interstate slave trade. Best passages are pp. 271-279 for Lincoln, and 294-305 for Douglas.

Jonesboro:

Covers states' right to choose, slavery in territories, existence of the Union as half slave and half free. Best passages are pp. 18-30, 73-76, 83-88 for Douglas, 31-41 for Lincoln.

Charleston:

Candidates give clear positions on equality of whites and Africans, spend most of the debate arguing over a speech by Judge Lyman Trumbull.

Galesburg:

Covers Kansas-Nebraska bill, states' rights, Dred Scott case, equality of white and African races, slavery vs the Constitution and Declaration of Independence.

Quincy:

Continues with topics from Galesburg debates, further comments on Dred Scott case, slavery in the territories.

Alton:

Same topics as Galesburg and Quincy debates, Kansas, Lecompton constitution.